

Genealogy - March Report

The March meeting revisited the topic of Probate and Wills.

A will can provide two pieces of information which are very useful to the family historian; the occupation and dwelling place of the person who made the will (the testator) and the relationship to the testator of those who were beneficiaries under the will. These relationships are especially valuable before the 1841 census and wills can go back to the 16th century and, occasionally, even earlier. Between 1530 and 1732 every grant of probate required an inventory of the estate to be produced, giving an insight into the lifestyle of the testator.

Probate is the legal process which recognises the validity of the will and authorises the executor(s) to distribute the estate of the testator as directed by the will. Even if there was no will then probate will result in an admon (short for administration) authorising someone to distribute the estate but in this case in accordance with the rules of intestacy, ie where there was a significant estate but no will.

Probate documentation is the key to finding a will, if there was one. After 12th January 1858 this is straightforward since all were then proved in the Civil Court of Probate and are listed in the National Probate 'Calendar' or index. Before that date wills were proven in the applicable Ecclesiastical Court which could have been anything from the local archdeacon's court right through a hierarchy of courts all the way up to the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, commonly known as Doctors Commons. The archive holding the will today will depend upon in which court the will was proved. Most of the archives are indexed online but not all. Finding a will – which may not even exist – can be a long-winded process, and that's just for English wills!

In April we will compare the most popular Family History sites on the internet – such as FamilySearch, Ancestry, FindMyPast, MyHeritage and so on. The meeting will again be by Zoom, as usual on the first Thursday of the month, April 7th, at 2pm. Details will be circulated to Genealogy group members nearer the time.

Alan Swindale ajs@fivenine.co.uk 01388488348 .